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THE BEATITUDES

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The Beatitudes form the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount—a part of Scripture which all good Christians value as one of their dearest possessions. Nor is the reason far to seek. The Great Teacher, whom Nicodemus with a true instinct recognized as having come from God, has opened his mouth; and salvation is flowing from his lips. Here, too, we stand at the source of Christian ethics. Never before were such truths uttered, such duties inculcated, or such blessedness revealed. Two things at once strike us with reference to the Beatitudes—their beauty and their impressiveness.

I. Their beauty is apparent to all. They are entirely in keeping with the fascinating character of the upland scenery amid which they were delivered. There is nothing like them in literature. No Greek philosopher, no ancient sage, no modern orator ever approached the divine attractiveness of this brief section of Holy Scripture. What gives to it such surpassing beauty? Three things at least contribute to this.

It has the beauty of eloquence. Human speech is capable of exerting an incalculable influence. Every generation has a few men with the voice of the charmer, able to sway multitudes by the power and persuasiveness of their speech. But no one ever possessed this influence to the same extent as the Lord Jesus Christ. “Never man spake like this man.” We have many proofs of this, but none stronger than that furnished by these opening sentences of the Sermon on the Mount. Eloquence has been described as the full expression of all that is within. This definition enables us to understand the unapproachable eloquence of these words. They are the manifest expression of the soul of Jesus.

It has the beauty of simplicity. Nothing could be simpler than the language in which Jesus introduces his gospel and clothes his ethical teaching. It is the language of the people, conveying his

thoughts in conceptions the simplest possible to the human heart. He always incloses his jewels in the smallest setting. Such simplicity as we find here has a beauty of its own. The sayings are so plain and concise and perfect in every way that any exposition of them is apt to detract from their extraordinary force and power.

It has the beauty of spirituality. This feature runs through the whole passage. To read it is like taking a plunge into another world. It seems all so utterly different from the materialism with which we are surrounded, and amid which most of our life is passed. And we rise from the perusal of it with the feeling that it is unquestionably the noblest ideal picture ever drawn. But are we to rest satisfied with this? Some apparently have done so, and have looked on the Beatitudes as containing merely a suitable exhortation to the Twelve as they entered on the work of active discipleship. This, however, is a very inadequate view. Jesus is speaking both to the future apostles and to the people, and every word of his address is to be applied spiritually, and regarded as setting forth the religion of the heart.

No less striking than their beauty is the impressiveness of the Beatitudes. They have the boldness of novelty, the weight of wisdom, and the purity of heaven. We cannot conceive of Christ's audience as not listening, or as listening unmoved; for here we have in combination all the qualities that can appeal with power to the human soul. Two things about the Beatitudes are particularly impressive.

The first is the contrast they present to the teaching of the Old Testament as seen in the Mosaic law. As we look on while the Savior addresses "the multitudes" on this mountain ridge, our thoughts naturally go back to another mountain full of interest for the people of God. A very different atmosphere encircles the two mountains. Thunder and lightning and thick darkness surround Sinai, the mountain whence proceeded the law and the curse on those who should disobey it; but calm, bright sunshine rests upon this nameless mount, which we shall not err in calling the Mount of Blessing. The gospel comes, not as a stern command, but as a fulfilled promise; not as law, but as blessedness.

The relation between the law of Moses and this manifesto of Jesus is not, however, fully stated by saying that it is one of contrast;

for the latter has been rightly regarded as the spiritual interpretation of the former. In Jesus the law is not destroyed, but fulfilled, and guarded against the false interpretations of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and other Jewish sectaries of the age. The Christian graces commended by our Lord must have appeared to many of his hearers in a very revolutionary light. Their ambitious notions and pharisaical estimation of themselves were in sharp contrast to the utter anti-worldliness of the discourse addressed to them. We can conceive their chagrin and disappointment when their expectations of worldly greatness to be realized on the advent of the Messiah were declared to be vain and illusive, and when, instead of their cherished maxim, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," that other was announced for their practice, "Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth."

But, some will say, have we not in effect a new law here? Must we not regard Christ as another lawgiver, obedience to whose law will bring salvation? His grace we know is freely given, but are not the fruits of grace demanded in such a way as to reintroduce the element of law? This is too large a question to discuss here, and we content ourselves with stating it as a point worth attention and serious thought. There are some difficulties connected with it, and chiefly this: How are we to reconcile justification through faith with the New Testament doctrine that believers shall be judged according to their works? Some would answer that, while all believers shall be saved, the difference in works will determine the difference in the degree of blessedness to be enjoyed. But in regard to this our theological systems need to be marked by more definiteness of statement.

Another very impressive feature of the Beatitudes is that they are all opposed to our usual way of thinking. To take an example: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." Although the primary reference here is probably to grief caused by the consciousness of sin and unworthiness, there is no reason for excluding the common application of the saying to the case of those who mourn the loss of departed friends. We say of one upon whom sorrow or bereavement has fallen, "Poor man, he is sorely troubled;" but the Savior says, "Blessed is he." We compassionate the man; Jesus congratulates him. We consider him as greatly afflicted;

Jesus looks on him as greatly blessed. There is a striking difference in the two ways of regarding the man. Both are proper, and both are necessary. It is because we are apt to forget the truth conveyed in the way that Jesus puts it, that he sets it forth here so impressively as the great thing to be remembered, and not because he is lacking in sympathy for the distressed. No one ever so deeply sympathized with afflicted ones as he, and we can do no more acceptable service than imitate him in the relief of suffering. Thus, then, while we need not give up the natural feelings of our hearts in regard to the subject of mourning, but ought rather to cherish them, we must bear in mind that there is another side from which Jesus here regards it when he speaks of the inward peace which may exist unseen, and which often breaks in upon us in the day of trouble. Affliction makes mourners of us, but when out of its clouds there comes the calm, sweet sunshine of heavenly grace and truth, we are able to see how exactly our Lord stated the case when he said: "Blessed are they that mourn."

II. The Beatitudes announce the perfect blessedness of Christ's people. The Savior here lays down his doctrine of happiness. One is struck by the boldness of his words. He is ready to deal with any case, even with such as are apparently most unpromising. He does not recognize any as beyond the reach of the gracious power of his doctrine. Let a man be in affliction, or under persecution, or filled with poverty of spirit—Jesus does not despair of giving him perfect happiness. Nay, he says there is a very important sense in which only those who are thus circumstanced can inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

Here, then, we have the solution of the question often put: Is there such a thing as true blessedness? Is it an attainable reality, or is it merely one of fancy's fond but foolish pictures? Is it a veritable fact, or simply an engaging subject of speculation? Are we to set it before us as a real and realizable object, as actually possessed by many, and capable of being possessed by all; or is it only a grim, sarcastic mockery on the woe-worn lives of mortals? Most men and most philosophies are ready with the answer that true and perfect blessedness is not a dream; it really exists. But when we come to ask what it is, and how it is to be reached, we meet with many diverse and conflicting replies. Riches, say some; pleasure, say others;

wisdom, say others still, is what confers blessedness. Each of these has had its votaries in almost every age. The writer of Ecclesiastes tried all three, but gave each up in turn as it failed to supply the chief good of which he was in quest.

The true solution lies before us in those sublime words with which our Lord prefaces his Sermon on the Mount. Their keynote is the idea of blessedness; and if we take a conjunct view of their teaching, we may regard that as the sum of the revealed and authoritative truth on this subject. He whose character harmonizes and blends the several qualities here specified as bringing blessing in their train, he, and he alone, is truly blessed.

It is also worth while to note that the first word uttered by our Lord in the exercise of his public ministry was this word "blessed," and that he repeated it over and over again. We may view it as the watchword of salvation, and as expressive of the purpose of the Savior's coming. He came to seek the lost and make them blessed. How it should rejoice the hearts of sinners to know that this is the class of persons for whom blessedness is prepared—to know that the highest blessedness may be the portion of those who have sunk themselves in lowest misery! It is from their ranks that Jesus draws his disciples. He creates in them a new heart. By implanting his grace within them he makes it possible for them to exhibit in their character the qualities which he specifies here as befitting those who are called by his name, and which he declares to bring happiness to everyone in possession of them. Each of the Beatitudes contains a promise, and each also implies an exhortation to cultivate such a state of heart as will lead us on to the blessedness of which they speak.

In reading the life of Christmas Evans, "the preacher of wild Wales," the present writer was interested to discover the way in which this truth of the blessedness of Christians is expressed in the Welsh language. It helped him to realize more fully than ever before the deep significance of this word "blessed." To the Welshman the man who is blessed is the man for whom there is *a white world*. "When you read, 'Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity,' the Welshman reads his Bible and sees there is a white world for such a one; i. e., all sin wiped out, the place quite clean, to begin again." But not even this exhausts the picture of

blessedness called up to the mind of the Welsh Christian by the literalness of his language. He sees in the man who is blessed the man for whom a white world is prepared; he sees heaven in the name as he reads: "There is a white world for the poor in spirit, a white world for the merciful, a white world for the pure in heart." He sees the thing in the word. Does not this singularly beautiful idea help us very much toward a right understanding of the meaning of our Lord? The Christian differs from other men in this, that through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, even the forgiveness of sins, he lives in a white world, although placed in a dark world, and can look forward to a white robe in a white world in the ages to come.

III. The Beatitudes declare the qualifications needful to secure the blessedness of which they speak, i. e., the conditions of membership in Christ's kingdom.

Our Lord makes it very plain what manner of men the members of his kingdom must be. They must be poor in spirit, and pure in heart, meek and merciful, peaceable and patient, bewailing sin, and ardently desiring righteousness. It is a good exercise for us as Christians to consider from time to time the hold which these terms have upon our affections, and to ascertain whether we are most drawn or repelled by them. They furnish us with a spiritual thermometer by which we may measure the warmth of our piety and the depth of our zeal. In setting before us the picture of the blessed of Jesus, they inevitably suggest the question: "How do we compare with it?" Every time we contemplate it we must say with growing conviction: "Truly his kingdom is not of this world;" and conceive of our discipleship accordingly, as those whose citizenship is in heaven. What the Savior promises to his people is just that after which they long and strive—the Kingdom of God, heaven, perfect blessedness in the vision of God. The way to the kingdom must be that which Jesus prescribes, and that which he himself has so nobly exemplified both by word and deed. We must seek inwardly to possess, and outwardly to exhibit, the qualities over which he pronounces his benediction.

These qualities are the reflection of his own spirit. Who ever hungered and thirsted after righteousness like him whose meat and

drink it was to do the will of God? Was not he meek and lowly in heart, calling on men to follow him in this particular, and find rest unto their souls? Who was ever more merciful and compassionate than he, the Good Physician? Who ever had so pure a heart as he who knew no sin, and whom God made to be sin in our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him? Who has done so much in the interests of peace as he who came to make peace between heaven and earth? Who was ever persecuted for righteousness' sake like him who was nailed to the ignominious cross? So he lived and suffered, and now he ever liveth in that blessed vision of God which he here promises to his people. The glory of Christ will be shared by all who have the mind of Christ.

This first picture of true discipleship shadows forth all that followed. To the end Christ knew no other Christianity than this: "If any man will follow after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me." In all the apostolic writings, however different the modes of thought distinctive of the various writers, we find the same noble striving after a heavenly life, carried on in the exercise of the graces here unfolded and in the face of the persecution here described. Throughout there is the significant paradox: "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." To our human nature such strenuous endeavor after righteousness is not easy. But out of the earthly material there may be evolved the higher life. Christ's kingdom is destined to rise on the ruins of the kingdom of this world. Our earthly surroundings are to be viewed as opportunities given us for striving after a higher kingdom—that which Jesus has revealed, and entrance into which shall bring us in the end where he is now, that we may behold his glory. The ideal attitude for the Christian is to be daily "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith," who is ever calling to men alike from cross and throne: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the merciful, the pure, the peaceable, the persecuted: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."